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Overview of the current international developments on East Timor, the role of solidarity and the international NGOs

by Agio Pereira

Introduction

Recently, the main concern has been the 'offer' of special status from President Habibie and the 15th Ministerial tripartite talk held in New York between the governments of Indonesia and Portugal under the auspices of the Secretary-General of UN. Because this time there was in principle agreement to start formal discussions about the so-called broad-based autonomy for East Timor during the 16th Ministerial tripartite talks in December this year, much has been said and written about the prospects of a solution either an autonomy or another form of self-government. The common feeling is that a solution is going to be found before the year 2000.

Attached to this question of special status/autonomy/transitional autonomy is the question of a referendum for East Timor so that through an act of self-determination the international community can ascertain the true wishes of the people. On one hand, the youth movement in East Timor is calling for a referendum; on another, the leadership of CNRT is pondering the pros and cons of a transitional autonomy as a face-saving device for Indonesia to disengage itself from East Timor. "What is the likely scenario" is the six-million-dollar question many people are contemplating. This overview is written as a small contribution to the understanding of the current developments. Both CNRT and Indonesian government appeared to have suddenly found themselves in a cath-22 situation.

For CNRT, accepting a transitional autonomy can amount to alienating the youth movement. This newly invigorating youth movement unequivocally sponsors immediate referendum so that independence can become a reality sooner rather then later. Being sponsors of the thesis of transitional autonomy for many years, Xanana Gusmao and Ramos-Horta now face the dilemma of having to convince the people about the elements of certainty enshrined in this strategy. Ramos-Horta, rightly so, believes that the President of CNRT, Xanana Gusmao, is the only person that can convince the people of East Timor on the lines that a transitional autonomy is the way to go. Hence, he has been calling for the release of Xanana Gusmao and also appealed for the Australian Government to do so. The Foreign Minister of Australia, Alexander Downer understood this call and surprised everyone when he recently called upon the Government of Indonesia to release Xanana Gusmao.

Favourable conjuncture

Everyone agrees that the current conjuncture is obviously favourable to East Timor. During the East Timor workshops promoted by ETRA to analyse and develop strategies for sustainable development in East Timor and during the week-long work with Jose Ramos-

Horta in Sydney, I have come to realised the need to look in-depth into the current developments.

I understand the situation of the solidarity movement/network, since feedback from the Timorese leadership is often not forthcoming unless there are specific meetings to coordinate ideas. Nevertheless, the central focus of solidarity ought to remain consistent: the campaign for the right to self-determination of the people of East Timor, for the release of Xanana Gusmao and all the political prisoners, campaign for the full respect of Human Rights in East Timor, working towards sustainable development in East Timor including internships and skills development, working towards enhancing the international profile of the Timorese, namely the Timorese women and the youth, are amongst the key focus to be maintained.

What is needed, in my view, is an up-to-date and regular feedback from the Timorese leadership and leading activists to the solidarity movement. In return, solidarity groups ought to also provide up-to-date and regular feedback to the Timorese so that the relevance of this symbiotic relationship can be enhanced.

Indonesia has fallen from an influential economic tiger to a humiliating beggar status in the world. Indonesia has lost its capacity to take initiatives and offensive actions against East Timor. Therefore, although East Timor also has suffered as a direct consequence of this Indonesian crisis, from a diplomatic and political perspective the current conjuncture is clearly beneficial for the people of East Timor and the solidarity work.

From the standpoint of East Timor, one can say that East Timor has lost so much in the past, due to the war. East Timor has always been on the periphery in the context of the Indonesian economy, and the Indonesian economy has hit the bottom and it will stay there for the next two years, at least.

East Timor has gained enormous credibility during the disastrous crisis in Indonesia and the way we, the Timorese, have behaved (ie. in a peaceful and not exploitative manner). We appealed to the World Bank for economic recovery in Indonesia instead of entering into a frenetic attack against the regime when it hit the bottom of its economic crisis.

How to move on from here?

Special status is just a delaying tactical move for Indonesia but, regardless, it is the notions of 'sovereignty' and 'internationally recognised broad-based autonomy' that become the critical points…

In the recent New York meeting between Portugal and Indonesia under the auspices of the UN), it was agreed to discuss the concept of 'broad-based autonomy', so that in December 1998 they can produce a draft proposal to see what could be (NOT should be) meant by this concept. Notion of (i) international autonomy and (ii) whose sovereignty should this be under are the critical issues.

For Indonesia, this is a delaying tactical move. It aims at delaying recognising the fact that East Timor is inevitably going to be independent. Not only myself, but Xanana Gusmao also agrees with this view. So this discussion about 'broad-based' autonomy is a face-saving device for Indonesia because the Indonesian Government is now under a transitional period which is to last until March next year. In one year time, Indonesia will be in a better position to recognise this reality.

We must look at this first concession of 'broad-based internationally recognised autonomy'. Let's, for instance, consider this notion of autonomy in its current dimensions. By December, Indonesia may agree to freeze a decision of the status of the territory in the near future. Lets say that we, then, are going to work with Indonesia as a 'de facto' power on the ground. The Indonesian flag may still be there, creating an ambiguous situation for the time being. But the UN and Portugal will also be there. One crucial reality is that, economically, Indonesia can not afford to cope with keeping East Timor at this moment.

So lets say that we, the Timorese, are going to agree with the UN. What must we do, as Timorese?

In the last New York tripartite talk under the auspices of the United Nations, the Indonesian Minister Ali Alatas stressed to the UN that he agrees that CNRT could also campaign in East Timor from next year and he also agreed that during the forthcoming All Inclusive Intra-Timorese Dialogue, the participants can now talk about political issues including self-determination. In otter words, no restriction as imposed in the past.

Regarding the AII-TD in October, if it is to occurs at all, this time it becomes an open forum debate. Jose Ramos-Horta holds the opinion that if the composition is the same, there should not be any more AII-TD. However, he sees this from the point of view of the so-called 'pro-Indonesian' participants which included the group of Abilio Araújo and Abilio Osório Soares and others from Timor that have no clear representation within the Timorese political communities. Ramos-Horta argues, and correctly so, that in the current conjuncture, those puppets of the Suharto's regime should be discharged from future AII-TD because they lack any credibility at all. He said that accepting their continued participation would make this forum (AII-TD) a complete mockery.

One alternative Ramos-Horta discussed with us is the broadening of the range of participants and not necessarily curtailing the participation of these puppets. This would be seen as a compromise which may render some advantage in terms of neutralising the puppets themselves. The fact that the AII-TD now can discuss all political issues means this could become a very positive forum. In this context, increasing the range of participants and maintaining the political profile of AII-TD as not necessarily being a 'national forum' per se, could render it unnecessary to demand the participation of the president of CNRT, Xanana Gusmao, or the vice-president Jose Ramos-Horta, for that matter. The forum could become a more constructive vehicle to discuss the nitty-gritty of government and development in East Timor during the transitional period and, therefore, become a useful vehicle for consensus before independence.

Under the current correlation of forces, what would be the best strategy for East Timor?

Firstly, we must build a very strong CNRT in East Timor, nurture the idea of a National Political Commission with two-thirds inside the country. We did it in Peniche to respond to a vacuum in a transitional phase. This vacuum is the non-existence of a political national consensual organisation to do the work in a transitional period. We must be politically all-encompassing in our approach to Government.

It is highly possible that East Timor will never need to go through a referendum. It is my view that a referendum currently is the best strategy to demand the self-determination rights of East Timor from a universal point of view. The reality on the ground, in Indonesia and East Timor itself, may prove to be more mature in the next six months. The idea of Indonesia relinquishing its demands of 27th province (East Timor) becomes so indefensible that Indonesia may simply sit down with the Timorese, with the UN and Portugal and work out a transitional government (instead of transitional autonomy) for East Timor. This would lead to

the direct election of a Legislative Assembly with a head of government to provide the right conditions for the adoption of a Constitution for the Republic of East Timor, based on the Magna Carta approved in Peniche by the Timorese National Convention on 25th of April this year, and a sovereign state can be declared and recognised by the United Nations within two to three years. The fact that East Timor has been a Non Self-Governing Territory registered in the UN Decolonisation Committee since 1960 and the UN General Assembly has declared in 1990 that the decade of the 1990's is the Decade of eradication of Colonialism, by the year 2000 East Timor becoming an independent state would be quite an achievement for the Timorese people and the solidarity movement, for Indonesia and Portugal and for the United Nations. I am proposing a scenario similar to that of Namibia. It is my belief that this scenario is not unrealistic.

Secondly, we - the Timorese and solidarity friends - as appealed to by Jose Ramos-Horta , ought to work together in the best possible ways to produce a solid and realistic set of strategies for short, medium and long term development in East Timor. Technical teams ought to enter East Timor now to assess, in loco, the real needs on the ground.

In a recent meeting between Jose Ramos-Horta and the solidarity groups in NSW, Jose said the following:

"I appeal to you to (i) continue the campaign for Australia to support a referendum in East Timor, and (ii) to continue to support and demand the release of Xanana Gusmao. Beyond that, apart from the political agenda, those of you who are working in the NGOs areas, either in the developmental area or humanitarian area, I would like to appeal to you to start looking into the post-independence in East Timor or looking into the transition in East Timor, to help rebuild the infrastructures in East Timor. East Timor is one of the most thoroughly destroyed countries in the world. I have visited in the last 23 three years, up to 100 (one hundred countries). I have been to some of the most devastated countries in the world, including Bosnia. Not too many countries have been as destroyed as East Timor, in every aspect. The post-independence is not going to be only building roads and bridges, building schools, health clinics. Repairing the environment, healing the wounds, the trauma of those tortured, raped, people outrooted from their ancestral lands where they lived for centuries, trauma of families torn apart from their country, in exile. This is going to be a monumental task for whoever is going to govern the country.

Therefore, I would like to make an emphatic appeal to you. Working with ETRA (East Timor Relief Association), with Mary McKillop Institute (of East Timorese Studies), Christians in Solidarity with East Timor, other NGOs such as Community Aid Abroad, ACFOA, do whatever you can to start thinking about what you can bring into East Timor in the near future."

Regarding the prospects of entrance of NGOs into East Timor, the Vice-President of CNRT, Jose Ramos-Horta said:

"I believe that in the next few months, Indonesia is going to relax access to the territory to NGOs. One thing I have insisted in the last few months, in my discussions at the UN in New York, with the World Bank, with the European Union, is for greater access to the International agencies into East Timor. Recently, the Secretary-General (Kofi Annan) confirmed to me that yes, he has already ordered an interagency discussion in New York between the various agencies to coordinate humanitarian and development assistance for East Timor. I believe the UNDP and UNICEF are preparing surveying missions there. Weeks ago, I met with Emma Bonino, the European Commissioner for humanitarian affairs, in Brussels, and she has assured me that she was going to send an urgent assessment mission to East Timor. The World Bank, a few days ago, I received a message in Lisbon, from the World Bank asking us to submit

specific proposals for them to consider in supporting directly the (developmental) work in East Timor. So there is a lot of interest now. To each of them I ask them to send their staff/personnel into East Timor, to work with the Timorese people, to train them and not to rely on Indonesian personnel. That is what we would like to see you (the solidarity) doing in the near future."

On the question of relations with Australia in the future, Ramos-Horta aired the following view:

"(...) in spite of what I have said regarding your Foreign Minister [Alexander Downer], one thing is certain: we are conscious of one thing. That's me, Xanana and all my other colleagues in the Timorese movement, we are conscious of our geography. Regardless of all the nasty things being done to us by successive Australian Governments, in the future, it will be in the best interest of East Timor, it will be, in fact, a strategic imperative, that we develop the closest possible relationship with Australia and New Zealand, as the best way to balance also our future relations with other country like Indonesia, Malaysia and so on. I believe that in the future, (not economically) but for East Timor to survive, to have an independent policy, it will have to develop a strong relationship with Australia and New Zealand, to counter, to balance out, the potential influence, bad or good, from other countries."

Practical approach

ETRA will soon implement some of these strategies in East Timor and wish to work with experts in the field of sustainable development to make sure that resources are used in an appropriate manner. We are working with key Timorese academics and regional solidarity groups to implement some projects. We are searching for funding to do this in the best and most efficient ways possible. All advice and ideas will be welcome and greatly appreciated. As a consequence of the two-day "strategies for sustainable development for East Timor workshop" held in Sydney between the 15th and 16th of August, Ramos-Horta proposed a broader two-day workshop at the end of December this year. The tentative dates are the 3rd and 4th of December, in Melbourne. CNRT and ETRA will be working on this seminar of Timorese experts and friends in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region to conceive these relevant strategies for East Timor. This is a critical stage for East Timor and all the technical cadres of East Timor will be mobilised to attend this workshop. It is a huge investment for the future of East Timor. Any feedback on this proposed idea will be welcome.

By December, when the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia and Portugal meet again under the auspices of the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, new developments may take place, new manoeuvres from the Indonesian camp may appear, but what matters to us, the Timorese and the solidarity movement, is to continue to work tirelessly as we have been doing in the last 23 years. The Indonesian delaying tactics can be killed, but only with real improvements on the ground - in East Timor - and through the enhancement of the structures of CNRT, including its modus operandi.

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